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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study examined the impact of student leadership experiences on the personal and professional lives of alumni three to five years after graduation. Twenty-six former student members of two student alumni leadership groups at the University of Wisconsin-Madison were interviewed by telephone. Interviews focused on participants' recall of their student leadership experience and its impact on their current lives. Analysis of the interviews identified the following themes in alumni responses: (1) student leadership resulted in meeting and working with a wide range of people; (2) student leadership involvement enhanced leadership, management, and teamwork skills; (3) student leadership increased the sense of pride in and connection to the university; (4) professional leadership, management, and teamwork skills were enhanced by student leadership experience; (5) personal and professional interpersonal communication skills were improved by student leadership experience; and (6) self-confidence and professional poise were increased by student leadership experience. Examples of student comments illustrate each of the identified themes. The original proposal for the study is attached. (DB)

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Post Graduation Impact of Student Leadership

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Abstract

The post graduation impact of student leadership experiences on the lives of alumni was investigated in this qualitative research study. Participants indicated that current skills in leadership, teamwork, and interpersonal communication were enhanced by their student experiences. They also indicated these experiences contributed to a strong sense of confidence and professional poise in a variety of settings.

Post Graduation Impact of Student Leadership

Significant evidence exists indicating that the college experience is enhanced when students are involved in out-of-class experiences like those sponsored by members of the Student Alumni Association/Student Foundation Network (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 1997). However, as student development professionals, we know very little about the impact of these experiences on students after they have graduated.

This unknown was the driving force for a qualitative interview study conducted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that investigated the post graduation impact of student leadership experiences. The study was designed to gain an understanding of graduates' perspectives along two dimensions of their experience. First, we gathered retrospective comments about their student leadership experience. Second, we collected information regarding how these experiences impacted their present-day situations. As we share background information and the results of our study, we make no attempt to generalize the long-term impact of student leadership experience, but we hope our efforts and interpretations encourage others to conduct their own investigations.

Context and Background

Student involvement is viewed to increase social and political awareness; improve writing and interpersonal communication, strengthen organization skills, contribute to cognitive development, and it has been closely related to later job success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996;Whitt, 1994). Aligned with these benefits, SAA/SF member organizations seek to promote the concept of student involvement in the areas of alumni relations, communications, and philanthropy with the ultimate goal of empowering students to strengthen the future of all areas of education (Hiser & Chewning, 1996). Many SSA/SF members engage in a variety of evaluative enterprises to assess the effectiveness of their efforts. For the most part, student development professionals are relatively adept at conducting short-term evaluations of leadership programs, however, we are not as thorough in conducting studies of the long-term effects of participation in our programs. This shortcoming is even more pronounced because it is critical that when measuring the effectiveness of our programs that we assess changes in participants over time. In his research of co-curricular programming, Thomas Chambers (1992) noted that the assessment of student development programs should be both short-term and long-term. With pressure at many institutions to contain costs and improve productivity, identifying the post graduation impact of student involvement is crucial to the effective administration of SAA/SF programs. Today's challenge for alumni and other student development professionals is to demonstrate the validity of the services and programs they offer to students (Cooper, Healy & Simpson, 1994).

The purpose of our research was to explore the impact that student leadership experiences have on the personal and professional lives of our students three to five years after graduation.

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Leadership Programs Studied

Our study was conducted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin Alumni Association (WAA). WAA is a non-profit, independent alumni association established in 1861. As broker between the University and the over 300,000 alumni, WAA sponsors a wide array of programs including: an international alumni club network with 112 chapters; a reunion and continuing education program; career programs for students and alumni; affinity groups including the African American Alumni Association, the Hispanic/Latino Alumni Council, the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Alumni Council, the American Indian Scholarship Council, and the Cabinet 99 Women's Initiative; an extensive travel program; publication of a bimonthly magazine and numerous newsletters; and sponsorship of Freshman Parent's Weekend.

In an effort to "grow" future alumni leaders, WAA has sponsored two student organizations since 1980 — the Wisconsin Alumni Student Board (WASB), and the UW Homecoming Committee. As self-governed and self-funded programs, WASB and the UW Homecoming Committee provide students with opportunities to develop leadership and business skills while engaging in community and campus service.

WASB's mission is, "to link students past, present and future." Each year its 60 members sponsor programs such as: Saturday tours for prospective students and their parents; two Outstanding Student Organization awards that recognize the efforts of their peers; a reception for graduating student leaders to thank them for their service; a prospective students day for students from two inner-city high schools in Chicago; and various community service projects.

The UW Homecoming Committee's 60 members coordinate a week of activities each year to bring together faculty, staff, students and the Madison community in celebration of the University. Committee members organize more than 12 events during the week that include student members from residence halls, student organizations, and fraternity/sorority houses. A second aspect the Homecoming Committee's mission is to raise money for the Student Assistance Crisis Fund. Through a Charity Run/Walk and merchandise sales, students annually raise an average of $10,000 for the Crisis Fund.

Each program develops its own unique group culture. In any given year, WASB generally functions at a rather "sedate" pace, with events scheduled throughout the year. On the other hand, Homecoming Committee's activities are "packed" into one hectic week that is preceded by six to eight weeks of intense planning.

Research Procedures

We contacted by telephone, 26 former student members of either the Wisconsin Alumni Student Board or the UW Homecoming Committee. Our participants were initially selected from a random list of 50 former WASB and Homecoming Committee members who had graduated between 1990 and 1995. Our goal was to complete as many interviews as necessary to reach data saturation, or the point where we sensed responses being repeated. As we attempted our telephone interviews, we discovered that our random list of 50 produced a relatively small percentage of "current" telephone numbers. To increase the number of useable telephone numbers, we subsequently drew additional names from a larger database of student program alumni. Names were selected purposively attempting to achieve distribution of gender, program membership, and graduation year.

Telephone interviews focused on the following open-ended questions with additional probes for response clarification:

- Were you in WASB or Homecoming?
- What stands out about that experience in your mind?
- Do you still stay connected/get together with the people you were on WASB/HC with?
- What kinds of skills did you develop while you were on WASB/HC that you're using today?
- What are you doing professionally?

We chose an inductive approach when analyzing interview responses. After collecting data, we coded responses and sorted them into thematic categories. Our participants are described by the following demographic characteristics:

Program Participation

44 percent members of UW Homecoming Committee
34 percent members of WASB
24 percent members of programs

Bachelor's Degree Year

19 percent graduated 1990
23 percent graduated 1991
12 percent graduated 1992
8 percent graduated 1993
15 percent graduated 1994
23 percent graduated 1995

Gender

54 percent male
46 percent female

Current Members of Alumni Association (WAA)

35 percent members of WAA*
65 percent not members of WAA

**Approximately 15 percent of all alumni are WAA members excluding first year complimentary memberships.*

Study Results

Student leadership in retrospect. There emerged several connections between participants' recall of their student leadership experience and comments they shared about their current personal and professional lives. When considering their involvement in retrospect, participants frequently referred to their interactions and relationships with a wide range of people. They acknowledged that their experiences allowed them get to know more people than if they had not been involved. Getting to know others resulted in long-lasting friendships and led to an increased appreciation for individual differences. We labeled this first theme: **(1) Student Leadership Resulted in Meeting and Working with a Wide Range of People**. The following comments support our conclusion:

- ***You get the opportunity to meet so many different people throughout the campus that you actually wouldn't meet. They [other students] should get involved because when the process is all done not only do you have lasting friendships, but you've actually had an effect on campus.*** (HC, Male, '90, History, State Politics)[1]

- ***I think mostly with WASB it was the people I worked with — getting to know different people in the group. That was a big thing. Getting to know people I wasn't around during the normal day.*** (WASB, Male, '91, Construction Administration, Construction Manager)

- ***I think another thing would definitely be the friendships that we found there. Just working with the people — it really taught me to work as a team with individuals and yet know when you had to do things on your own . . . . Those friendships that we made were very valuable.*** (WASB, Female, '95, Agricultural Journalism, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture)

- ***I think just meeting a close group of people who made the school a little less intimidating and developing some good friendships.*** (WASB, Female, '90, Zoology, High School Teacher)

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[1] Note: Participant characteristics are identified after each quote using this format: **(Organization Membership, Gender, Year of Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Current Profession)**

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Given the business-like operating structure of the two student organizations, several participants reflected on the similarities between student experiences and current work situations. Important aspects of their student experiences included working with peers, learning the value of teamwork, and managing people while appreciating difference. We identified our second theme: **(2) Student Involvement Enhanced Leadership, Management, and Teamwork Skills**. These responses support our finding:

- ***One of the keys is working with — work WITH is the key — diverse people. There wasn't anyone in charge — no dictatorship. You had to work with people with varying background and varying interests . . . That's one of the key things, working with people. Working with diverse people from varying backgrounds in an empowerment situation.*** (HC, Male, '91, Environmental Engineering, Environmental Engineer)

- ***I think in general the good broad experience almost on the business side, planning event kind of thing was important. I think it was also helpful to have all the talk about job interviews especially coming out of school. We really put together different products and had to market them, talk them up. The way the sales went through the years I was involved exceeded the previous year.*** (HC, Male, '91, Mechanical Engineering, Technical Marketing)

- ***WASB and HC are very much like a real work organization. Working in a team environment is different than part-time grunt work . . . you learn how to deal with people. [You] can't be friends with everyone all the time. You need to treat people as you want to be treated*** (WASB and HC, Male, '95, Agricultural Journalism, Radio Promotions)

- ***Whenever we did team-oriented things — retreats, survival kits — coming together at a time of duress — that's when we see why we're all in WASB. For Homecoming Committee I remember pulling things together as a group.*** (WASB and HC, Male, '92, International Relations, Marketing Communications)

- ***I remember just being in charge of something and I relate that to what I'm doing now – in charge of other people and coordinating a bunch of people's schedules and a bunch of people's personalities and all those kind of things and making it all work.*** (HC, Male, '92, Journalism, Restaurant Manager)

The third theme that emerged as participants reflected on their student experiences related to the increased sense of pride they felt toward the University. These former volunteers recalled their experiences using words such as appreciation, pride, enthusiasm, and fun. In one instance, an almost awe-like recognition for what they had accomplished was evident. We labeled this third theme: **(3) Student Leadership Increased the Sense of Pride in and Connection to the University**. Support for this theme is evident in these comments:

- ***The amazing amount of fun we had is memorable. Also, I was amazed, proud and humbled by the response we had and what we were able to accomplish. It was an incredible experience. When I think of school I immediately think of folks in their red [UW] jackets.*** (WASB and HC, Male, '94, Sociology / Political Science, Political Consultant)

- ***The friendship I formed and involvement in the university — combined with the fun is what I remember. You come out of a university experience like that with a whole new appreciation for university.*** (WASB, Female, '92, Marketing / Management)

- ***Spirit, pride, and enthusiasm to get lots out of it is what I remember. Wonderful cohesiveness, closeness, and general positive feeling for the benefit of others.*** (WASB and HC, Female, '94, Mathematics, Investor)

- ***[I remember] the relationships that I built from working with the other students and working with the alumni association. I feel very connected right now to the university in a lot of ways because of this organization.*** (HC, Male, '95, Economics / Communication Arts, Medical Sales)

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Impact on current lives. Having examined reflections of the student leadership experience, we next investigated aspects of this experience that participants found to be influential in their current personal and professional lives. Specifically, we sought to explore how the skills and abilities fostered in student alumni programs were applicable to their post graduation lives. As we sorted and coded data, three themes emerged.

Our first theme clearly connects participants' retrospective observations about their student leadership experience to their current lives. During the student experience; leadership, management and teamwork skills were recalled as important aspects. In their present situations, many of these same skills were reported as being used on a regular basis. We labeled this initial theme: **(1) Professional Leadership, Management, and Teamwork Skills were Enhanced by Student Leadership Experience**. When asked to tell us what they learned as student leaders and relate that learning to their current lives, participants made the following comments:

> • ***Once I've been out, I've noticed that's really the way it is with the people at my company. Their families are their first priority, their spouses. You know there's a lot of first priorities. The job they still want to do well, but it competes with so many other things in your life. The management style I now like to use is one where nobody is going to be told what to do. . . . Working with diverse people from varying backgrounds in an empowerment situation. Being co-chair and going to school full-time and doing almost a full-time job [homecoming co-chair] for a few weeks — several months actually — it really taught me how to balance priorities. Practice with time management, I think that has really paid off.*** (HC, Male, '91, Environmental Engineering, Environmental Engineer)

> • ***I use prioritization skills a lot and leadership skills. In the career that I'm in, I have four managers underneath me, and then I have staff that is underneath them. It's being able to rely on certain people, give up my ownership and yet maintain it in some way. I don't know if that makes sense? You have to trust other people to get done what is needed. That happened a lot with the homecoming parade subcommittee. You hoped that everything turned out okay.*** (HC, Male, '92, Journalism, Restaurant Manager)

> • ***More than anything else, I learned you need to hire people you can trust and with whom you can work toward the same goal. You must surround yourself with good people. Also, I learned the importance of respecting differences, especially if you share the same goal – respect people's different ways of getting there.*** (WASB and HC, Male, '94, Sociology / Political Science, Political Consultant / Campaign Manager)

> • ***Negotiating and collaborating – For me, being a social work student, I wasn't getting a lot of business skills in terms of marketing, advertising, and analytic skills. I still use those now . . . being a leader as well as following a leader. Having enthusiasm even when you're dead tired – rallying the troops.*** (HC, Female, '91, Psychology, Graduate Student)

The second theme we discovered is anchored in communication skills and interpersonal relationships. An increased sense of appreciation for and the ability to work with a diverse group of people were attributed to the student experience. We identified this second theme as; **(2) Personal and Professional Interpersonal Communication Skills were Improved by Student Leadership Experience**. We offer these comments as support:

> • ***Communication — I learned a lot about relationships in a diverse group or population of people. I learned much more that growing up in a homogeneous environment. That's why I chose a big university. People with different opinions and agendas working together as team.*** (WASB and HC, Male, '92, International Relations, Marketing Communications)

> • ***People skills — I was an ambassador. I worked with people and I went to founder's days. I'd tell others that it is well worth the investment of time. WASB is my third degree. Political Science and Communication Arts are the others. I was in marching band, too. . . It [WASB] opens some doors. It helps you . . . It makes you organize your time.*** (WASB, Male, '90, History, Fed Ex Agent)

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• *Communication skills — The biggest strength is the interpersonal communications skills I use. Really neat experience that made me feel closer to school. I got back a lot more than I put into it.* (WASB and HC, Male, '94, Mathematics, High School Teacher)

An increased sense of self-confidence and improved poise in professional situations are central to our third theme; **(3) Self-Confidence and Professional Poise were Increased by Student Leadership Experience.** The value of their involvement is evident in the professional lives of many participants. The following comments support our conclusion:

• *I think because of what I did for homecoming – sponsorship — that really did a lot for me in my current job of medical sales. I really learned how to approach large businesses and learned how to work with them — I mean I was calling on some of the presidents of these companies when I was 22 years old so it was kind of new to me at first but it boosted my self confidence a lot. . . I can kick back and go into any large company and not be afraid because I've done it before. I think that's one of the biggest things I learned probably because of what I did. Just learning not to be intimidated by people who are really important – people like Donald Shanahan [former chancellor] or Margaret House [dean of students]. Some of these people seemed untouchable and just to find out that they're really down-to-earth – I got a lot of exposure to that.* (HC, Male, '95, Economics / Communication Arts, Medical Sales)

• *I think that I established a sense of marketing, you know from trying to market the University — public relations, communications, just an overall sense of being more positive. I think it's just had a positive influence. It's made me a more positive person – made me more outgoing, a go-getter.* (WASB, Female, '95, Agricultural Journalism, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture)

• *Speaking skills and the poise you develop [are things I use today] . . . Going around to the different Founder's Day dinners and speaking. When we had to go to the dinners, they asked us to go as students. We were just keeping the alumni in touch with what was happening at the university. I would share things about getting my degree in Zoology and taking courses, how things were going, how things were developed within the school.* (WASB, Female, '90, Zoology, High School Teacher)

We acknowledge that these data are presented according to our praticioner researcher interpretations. We encourage readers to make their own interpretations about the post graduation impact of student leadership experiences.

Observations and Conclusions

As student development professionals, it was a tremendously rewarding experience to hear about the impact that our student programs had on these alumni. The life skills they obtained are ones that are regularly being called "crucial" and "most important" for our graduates — the ability to work with diverse groups of people; proficiency in interpersonal communication and public speaking; the ability to work in and lead teams. Not the least of the impacts is the lasting friendships they made.

Our study begins to provide evidence that our student programs go a long way in establishing a lifelong connection. If we were to do the study over, an area that we would investigate more fully might be the degree to which our student program alumni remain involved with WAA through their local alumni clubs and as career mentors for current students. Only our demographic data provides a glimpse at this aspect showing that 30 percent of our participants are current WAA members compared to 15 percent of the overall alumni population. Our ideal would to conduct another study in 10 years that reveals the contributions of these former student volunteers to the WAA Board of Directors, to University, and to their local communities. And as pragmatists, we would also like to discover that several are major financial contributors to the institution.

Our study indicates that the post graduation impact of student leadership experiences in student alumni programs is significant and our programs serve as fertile ground to "grow" active and contributing alumni. However, it also provided a wonderful "excuse" to reconnect with former students, reinforcing

the aspect of student alumni program work at the Wisconsin Alumni Association that is by far the most rewarding. While our data show that students gain much through their experiences, their advisors gain just as much if not more. In closing, we would like to acknowledge the Wisconsin College Personnel Association and the American College Personnel Association, Commission I, for the financial support they provided us for this project.

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Research Proposal

Our research proposal follows. It was prepared in response to a call for research proposal issued by the Wisconsin College Personnel Association (WCPA). We were awarded $400 by the state association. Upon receiving this award, we later submitted the proposal in response to a call issued by the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) - Commission I. We received $150 research award from the commission.

POST GRADUATION IMPACT OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

Abstract

Our study explores the impact that leadership experiences have on the personal or professional lives of students three to five years after graduation. We hope to expand the definition of what are valuable aspects of leadership experiences and thus provide the foundation to increase the effectiveness of new and existing programs.

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POST GRADUATION IMPACT OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

Purpose of the Research Study

The purpose of our study is to investigate the impact that participation in student leadership experiences has on individuals three to five years after graduation. We will explore the research question: What aspects of their past participation in student leadership do alumni perceive as valuable in their current personal or professional lives?

Significance

College student personnel professionals have become adept at conducting short-term evaluations for a variety of student leadership programs and activities. We have not, however, been as thorough in conducting studies of the long-term effects of participation in leadership experiences. One of the keys to measuring effectiveness of leadership development programs was identified as the assessment of changes in participants over time (Chambers, 1992). In his work, Chambers proposed that "assessment of leadership development programs should be both short-term and long-term" (p. 347).

Inquiry into the long-term effects of participation in student leadership should be a component of a systematic means of evaluation that contributes to the quality of leadership programs and responds to accountability demands (Delworth & Hanson, 1980). Citing the work of Freeman, Chambers (1994) noted that few leadership programs have evaluation plans that assess the process and impact of these efforts on students. With increasing pressures at many colleges and universities to contain costs and increase productivity (National Association of

Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 1996) identification of the post graduation impact of participation in student leadership experiences is vital to effective administration of leadership programs. The challenge for student affairs professionals is to demonstrate the validity of the services and experiences offered to students outside the classroom (Cooper, Healy & Simpson, 1994). Our study proposes to take one step toward meeting this challenge and to extend the theories of student involvement.

Development of leadership skills was found by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) to be the direct result of student involvement and closely related to later job success. Students are also aware of the impact that involvement in leadership experiences has on their lives. This awareness is supported by Whitt (1994) who noted, "they [referring to students] associate involvement in leadership with enhanced social and political awareness; improved thinking, writing, communication, and organization skills; and expanded notion of majors and career choices" (p. 202). Our study will investigate and expand on these noted impacts of involvement in student leadership. As co-investigators and graduate students, we hope that our research will provide the basis for additional study with the potential to be expanded in our respective dissertation research projects.

Research Study Design

Our study will use qualitative methodology, with primary data collection based upon structured telephone interviews with a minimum of 50 alumni of the (a) Wisconsin Alumni Student Board and the (b) University of Wisconsin Homecoming Committee (see Appendix A for description). The study population will be drawn from a random sample of individuals who

were involved in either leadership experience anytime during the past three to five years. Selected participants will be mailed an introductory letter explaining the study and inviting their participation. Telephone calls will begin one week after the date of the letter mailing.

Participants will be asked four questions focusing on aspects of their leadership experiences that have impacted their personal or professional lives. Limited demographic information will be collected during the interviews, however, detailed information such as age, gender, and college degree is available from an existing database. This information will be included in our analysis. Content analysis of interview responses will be performed with the unit of analysis being themes (sentences or phrases) about how past leadership experiences have impacted individuals' personal or professional lives.

Timeline

February - March 1997	Identify sample / pilot interview questions
March - May 1997	Conduct interviews
May - August 1997	Analyze data
August - September 1997	Prepare report
October 1997	Final report submitted for publication

Proposed Budget

Postage		39.00
75 introduction letters, first class @.32	24.00	
75 follow-up/thank you postcards @.20	15.00	
Telephone		100.00
Miscellaneous (telephone equipment, computer usage, paper and printing)	n/a	
TOTAL		139.00

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Wisconsin Alumni Association

Student Relations Programs

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APPENDIX (A)

Wisconsin Alumni Student Board (WASB)

- 60 member organization
- Closed membership - no dues
- Service oriented
- Audiences are current & prospective studens & alumni

UW Homecoming Committee

- 60 member organization
- Closed membership - no dues
- Philanthropic organization (raises money for Dean of Students Crisis Fund)
- Organizes 10 days of Homecoming activities & events
- Audiences are UW-Madison students, staff, faculty, and the Madison community

Wisconsin Future Alumni Association (WFAA)

- 550 members
- Open membership
- Member and community service organization
- $15 annual dues
- Audience is all UW-Madison students

Senior Class Officers

- Four elected officers involved
- Closed membership - must be elected by class
- Mission is to plan a "Senior Celebration"
- Audience is all seniors at UW-Madison

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All of the above student organizations:
Are self-governing
Are self-sustaining (raise funds for all programs)
Have some aspect of community service in their mission
Act as ambassadors of the Wisconsin Alumni Association
Are provided staff support, office space and equipment access
Enhance the out-of-classroom learning opportunities for students by providing them with leadership & skill development opportunities.